

**Town of Eliot
Budget Committee Meeting
Thursday, March 2, 2023**

1. Call to Order

Chair Donna Murphy called the meeting to order at 5:00pm. The meeting started later than usual due to glitches in connecting the meeting to zoom as the incorrect link was sent out in the meeting notice. Donna said the meeting was streaming but that the public could not participate remotely. She read aloud the meeting id and passcode twice in case there were members of the public listening who wanted to get into the meeting to comment. In attendance in person were Gene Wypyski, Denny Lentz, Donna Murphy, and Reggie Fowler, and in attendance remotely were Jean Hardy and Diane Holt. Jeff Leathe was absent. Ann Lukejord, recording secretary, was in attendance in person.

2. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

3. Approval of the Minutes

The members reviewed and commented on the minutes from February 15th and 22nd meetings. Gene motioned and Diane seconded that the February 15, 2023, minutes be approved as amended. The motion passed with a roll call vote of 6-0. Donna motioned and Reggie seconded that the February 22, 2023, minutes be approved as amended. The motion passed with a roll call vote of 6-0.

4. Budget Review

The Chair updated members on where the Budget Committee was in terms of receiving requested information from the Town Manager. She noted that the Committee was scheduled to vote on the budget numbers that evening and that in anticipation of doing so, she had sent out a worksheet she had created with the limited information the Committee had.

Donna said that today at 10:54am, the Town Manager had emailed her the Reserve Account numbers. Given that she works during the day she did not receive them until a few minutes before 3pm and only then was she able to forward the information to Budget Committee members. The information included the CIP (Capital Improvements Plans) numbers listed on the warrant. She noted that this was the first time the Committee had seen those numbers. Worksheets were also sent out by the Town Manager but were not received until 3:13pm; the Town Manager said there had been a glitch in getting the email out. The Chair said she was not able to review the information having received it an hour before the meeting. She asked members if they had received the information. Jean, Diane, Reggie, Denny, and Gene all responded that they had received the Chair's email with the information in it.

The Chair proposed that given that the members did not have time to review the information and that the Committee still had time to get its vote to the Select Board by March 9 as required, that the Budget Committee's vote be tabled to give members time to review the information. She added that one hour is not enough time to review this information which is information the Committee has been requesting for quite some time. She said that it is unacceptable to receive the information the

day the Committee is scheduled to vote on it. She added that she did not receive the budget calendar until two weeks ago. Reggie noted that the document is a 32-page update or memo, noting its size of information, and that they received it an hour before the Budget Committee meeting. Denny added that nowhere in the 32-pages were there any indications as to what had changed.

Donna proposed that the Budget Committee table its vote until its Wednesday, March 8, 2023, meeting to provide members time needed to review the information. She noted this would still give the Budget Committee time to get its vote to the Select Board for its meeting on March 9. She opened the floor to discussion.

Jean noted that there were no page numbers and directed members to Fixed Assessments. She noted that the Town Manager had moved the William Fogg Library request to Fixed Assessments at the suggestion of the auditors. Donna said the Town Manager separated it in the articles but not in the budget. Donna directed members to the Citizens Option Meeting Article 21, in the email sent out at 10:54am by the Town Manager, where the Fogg Library is separated out for voting. Donna said it conforms with the ordinance as presented at the Citizens Option Meeting.

Donna said, "What you're stating here, Jean, I'll state it out loud, the budget that he presented to us all along, until today, isn't broken out by article." She added that in the short time of an hour and seven minutes before the Budget Committee meeting, she did not have time to review the material.

Jean asked if Budget Committee members will be attending the Citizens Option Meeting. Donna answered that the members do every year and that they have not been invited officially. Jean said she will attend this year. Donna said there was a table for the Budget Committee last year. Jean asked how the Town Manager can send out the material without it being voted on by the Budget Committee or Select Board. Donna said she did not know that it had been sent out to anyone outside the Budget Committee and probably the Select Board. Jean said it was a bit confusing and read directly from the Town Manager's email: "Attached are the Citizens Option warrant that I will be asking the Board to endorse at their March 9th meeting. As you can see the recommendations for the Budget Committee have been left blank. I would respectfully ask the Budget Committee consider and support those recommendations."

Donna said that previously, with the former town manager, the information arrived in December broken out to match the articles so there were no surprises, and that this year the Committee received the information on the day in March the Committee was planning to vote on the information. Donna used the William Fogg Library as an example, stating that in previous years, the Library had been in a separate section in previous budget books, and that every section in the prior books was a separate article until this year.

Gene said that he had found the documents on the Town website that morning of the current meeting. He noted that the documents were public documents at this point and that when he went through the latest budget, there were only one or two changes in that budget and that they were highlighted in yellow. He suggested members look at them compared to the information they have as there were two to three things that were different, and they are highlighted. He added that the

one thing he did notice as he went through the spreadsheet, the FY24 budget, and the group of warrant articles was that everything matched perfectly. He pointed out some examples of where he saw items matching up. Donna thanked Gene for his comments.

Donna motioned that the Budget Committee table its vote that evening until its next meeting on Wednesday, March 8, 2023, which will be one-day prior to the Select Board needing the Budget Committee's vote, to allow members six days to review the 32 pages of information and to reconvene on March 8 to discuss the information, make recommendations, and vote. Reggie seconded the motion. The floor was open to further discussion.

Jean asked about the substantial increase for the William Fogg Library in the FY24 budget with no information on what the funds will be spent on and presented as just a lump sum of over a quarter of a million dollars. Donna said the amount is not required to be split out but that the Budget Committee received a breakdown of that information. Jean thanked Donna for clearing that up. Donna added that she had still not heard back from the Library about salary savings the Library may have realized over the past two and a half months when the Library was operating without a director and specifically, what that amount was and if the Library could reduce its requested amount by rolling over those funds this year. The members voted on the motion to table its vote to the March 8th meeting, and it passed by a roll call vote of 6-0.

5. Budget Committee member reports/comments

Diane agreed that members need to go back over the information that they had received prior to the meeting and that hopefully it will help make more sense out of things.

Gene had a question about the municipal property tax level limit worksheet, also known as LD1, and if the Committee had to decide anything about it. Donna explained that LD1 "is basically a guideline for towns to look at a reasonable increase to taxpayers. So, if last year you had a million-dollar budget, and your increase was \$300,000 under this, that's kind of the suggested amount to not go over. Townspeople will vote on that, whether they want to exceed it or not, and that's what you're looking at in Article 3. So, if they vote on Article 3 and they say no we don't want to exceed that, if this budget exceeded it, the Select Board would then choose where to cut." Donna added that in recent years, this had happened, and the Select Board had to decide what items to cut.

Donna directed members to Article 22, Social Services Agencies. She suggested that the \$12,000 requested for Footprints Food Pantry and the \$50,000 for Mainspring be pulled out of that article and presented to voters as stand-alone items given the large amount of money being requested. She said it may be difficult for taxpayers to vote for a lump sum that is so much larger than past years. She added that it would be a lot clearer for the taxpayers to vote on those items if they are separated out. Gene asked if that wasn't the role of the Budget Committee to make that type of recommendation, and Donna responded that that was why she was making the recommendation. Gene said that she wanted to change the format. Donna responded that she did not want to change the format and repeated her proposal to members. Reggie said he found it reasonable to break out the Footprints and Mainspring numbers to let voters see what the change is, especially as the amount is jumping from just under \$12,000 to \$76,000.

Gene asked, "But why would we want to change an article's format?" Donna responded that they are not changing the format. Gene said she wanted to add an article and that that is not what the ordinance calls for.

Reggie pointed out that two items were causing the Social Services amount to jump five times from its amount last year. Donna said that it is not a format change. Jean said she agreed with the Chair and that going back many years, when the Town held lengthy Town Meetings, each item would be voted for separately. She added that she felt the citizens should have the option of which charities they support and to have it lumped in as one or nothing is a disservice to Eliot residents. Donna pointed out that it is a significant amount and that in the past items have been put in separately when they are significant amounts. She added that it does not change the format of anything and only suggests that two articles be added for Footprints and Mainspring. Gene said the ordinance does not provide for that. Donna said the ordinance does and clarified that the ordinance states the minimum of what needs to be included. Gene said that the Budget Committee cannot arbitrarily add an article. Donna said that is not what she is proposing and that she is proposing the Budget Committee send as a suggestion to the Town Manager that those two items be broken out into separate articles. She added the Budget Committee is not breaking it out into separate articles but that the Budget Committee is proposing that the Town Manager does that. Denny added and Diane agreed that it was because of the large number. Diane added that in the past when there are new items they have been broken out. Denny noted that there are no established guidelines for when an item reaches a certain amount it is broken out as a separate item. Donna said there is nothing like that but that it has been done in the past. Denny agreed. Donna said that her proposal is that the Committee make this recommendation to the Town Manager and that what he does with it is his choice. She added that she is concerned about these items being lumped together creating such a significantly high amount. Denny said he believes it is the right thing to do for the public.

Gene said he disagreed, saying "only because the thing already is listed as a separate item, as the citizen looks at this budget, they will see exactly how much that is, it is totally transparent."

Donna responded that voters cannot vote for separate articles and if they don't vote for it then the whole thing gets shot down and the Town would revert to the \$11,600 for Social Services Agencies. Gene responded that that is the voters' choice. Reggie said Footprints and Mainspring might be good things to do but if they are bundled in with everything else, they might be voted down. Gene said if the Budget Committee puts down its recommendation it will tell voters what they recommend.

Donna asked Gene, "So, let's just assume this Committee votes no and goes with the \$11,600, are you good with that?"

Gene answered, "Well, let the Legislative Body be what it is."

Donna answered, "But I think the Legislative Body, for transparency, these are two brand new items, very large items, and they ought to be separated out so the townspeople can see what their money is being spent on and whether they want to support it or not. Let me ask you this, if you are willing to say, do you support the \$50,000 and the \$12,000?"

Gene asked, "Personally?"

Donna responded, "For the Budget Committee."

Gene said, "I think that's subject to our conversation, we'll go over everything in these six days and talk about it next week."

Donna said, "Okay."

Gene said, "I just think if we start parceling these articles for whatever reason (interrupted)."

Donna said, "We aren't, we're just making a recommendation to the Town Manager. We don't have the authority to add an article. We don't have the authority to change this. This is to make a recommendation to the Town Manager and to the Select Board that we separate these two large, brand new items out so it is clearer to the townspeople."

Denny said, "As it is, Madame Chair, the public will not see those two large items. Is that correct?"

Donna answered this is one of the articles that is broken out but that the public will only vote on the lump sum. She added that Debt Services, CIP, and Town Committees are other articles where funding must be broken out. She added that looking at the Reserve Account information the Committee received, there was also a lot of new information.

Donna motioned that the Chair email the Town Manager with the recommendation that Footprints and Mainspring be removed from Article 22, and each have a stand-alone article. Reggie seconded the motion. The Chair opened the floor to further discussion.

Reggie asked if there was a way the voters can veto a line item. Donna answered there is not and that voters can only vote on the total amount. She added that if the voters were going to reject that amount, the best voters could do would be to vote for last year's number. She said that the Select Board and/or Budget Committee could recommend that the two amounts be removed, but the Committee cannot add an article. She added if the Select Board or the Budget Committee or both did not approve that amount and removed it from the total, that is what would show on the ballot.

Reggie pointed out that while most people in Eliot know about Footprints, that is not the case with Mainspring. He asked given the large amount of \$50,000 requested in the article for Mainspring, could an explanation be added on the ballot as to what the funds are for, so people know why this amount was bundled in. Donna answered that people would have to come to meetings to learn about that information and that it cannot be printed on the ballot. Reggie asked if there was any way to tell the public what they are voting for, and Donna responded that the Budget Committee tries to do that, specifically through the Citizens Option Meeting. Donna said that voters have voted for the lowest amount in the past, on all but two items last year, and if residents vote for the lowest amount, then this will not be funded.

Reggie expressed concern that people will see one line item that is so big and vote it down. Donna said she suspects that voters look at the bottom line and vote for the lowest amount. She pointed out that if these items are bundled in, there's a good chance people will not vote for them, where if they are stand-alone articles, voters might vote for them. Reggie said there are a lot of good things to vote for in voting for this funding. Donna added that it did not sit well with her to bury something like this, and that if Footprints and Mindspring appear on the ballot as stand-alone items, with no dollar figures from last year, then that how residents vote on it would inform the Town as to townspeople support them or not. There was no further discussion. The motion passed with a roll call vote of 5-1.

The Chair asked if any members had further comments. No one did.

6. Adjournment

Reggie moved and Denny seconded that the meeting be adjourned. The motion passed with a roll-call vote of 6-0. The meeting adjourned at 6:04pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Donna Murphy, Chair

Date Approved: March 2, 2023

Jean Hardy, Secretary